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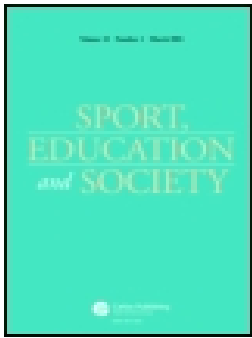
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'I just can't bear these procedures, I just want to be out there working with children': an autoethnography on neoliberalism and youth sports charities in the UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses an autoethnography to recount my experiences with SportHelp, a UK youth sports charity. Using a layered account format, which jumps through time and space, I demonstrate the extent to which neoliberal values have influenced the continuity and change of SportHelp. This paper does not constitute an attack on the charity, its staff, nor the charity sector. The focus is on how the wider neoliberal context shapes how SportHelp operates. The findings are analysed in terms of Foucault's (2008, *The birth of biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan) notion of governmentality by examining SportHelp's monitoring and reporting practices, as well as the managers' use of New Public Management discourse. The conclusion reflects on the extent to which neoliberal governmentality, though in some instances beneficial for SportHelp, ultimately does more harm than good. This paper, by offering an 'insider's view', adds to the literature calling for a change in how policy makers and funders shape the current hypercompetitive socio-political landscape. Charities should be supported, not discouraged, to develop holistic programmes that move beyond 'economic rationales' and are capable of addressing the multifaceted needs of their service users.

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Introduction

Previous research on youth sport programmes run by community groups or charities has often focused on the programmes themselves, or on a particular aspect of the programme. These studies have ranged from the role coaches play in helping young people develop (Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2014) to looking at experiences of young people's participation (Bowers & Green, 2013) as well as exploring parents' views of youth sport programmes (Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012). Other research has analysed how youth sports initiatives are used to help disadvantaged or vulnerable youths, and the extent to which these initiatives produce the outcomes they claim (Coalter, 2012; Vandermeerschen, Vos, & Scheerder, 2015). Lastly, some authors have also examined specific aspects of youth sport programmes, such as social inclusion as well as social or cultural capital (Morgan, 2016; Spaaij, 2012).

Comparatively less attention has been paid to how the socio-political context influences the development of youth sports programmes. An examination of how the neoliberal context affects youth sports charities is important because the sport programmes they create do not just 'happen'. The socio-political context shapes how sport programmes are crafted, delivered, and evaluated: 'politics' include all processes of governing people and administering policies, at all levels of organisation,

both public and private. Therefore, politics are an integral part of sport' (Coakley, 2009, p. 466). Appreciating how neoliberalism influences youth sport charities enables us to understand *how* and *why* sport programmes are developed in particular ways, as well as *why* certain outcomes are championed over others. To illustrate the role context plays, it is worth quoting the recent work done by Thorpe and Rinehart (2013). They looked at two case studies of international action sport NGOs within a neoliberal context and concluded:

... to survive, and indeed thrive, in a competitive market saturated with NGOs and shrinking funding, such organizations [NGOs] are increasingly developing intimate relationships with governmental and/or for-profit organisations, and employing corporate-inspired communication strategies, that resonate strongly with the neoliberal focus on market solutions (e.g., individual responsibility, entrepreneurialism, global trade, transnational corporate branding, the need for sustained economic growth and ongoing development) (p. 134).

To build upon Thorpe and Rinehart's analysis, I have used an autoethnography to explore the influence neoliberal governmentality has on the change and continuity of the UK youth sports charity SportHelp. According to the Charity Commission (2013), a charity in England and Wales is an organisation that (a) aligns with one of thirteen 'charitable purposes' (like the 'relief of youths in need'), and (b) is for the public benefit. SportHelp's contribution to the 'public benefit' stems from their remit: supporting the psychosocial development of socio-economically disadvantaged youths (8–18 years old) through sport. These sport sessions are led by qualified coaches who aim to teach their sport and instil 'life skills' (positive psychosocial attributes and behaviours such as teamwork—Weiss, Bolter, & Kipp, 2014).

I should be clear about what this paper is and what it is not. I am neither launching an attack on SportHelp, nor am I discrediting the youth sports charity sector. This paper expands on the work of previous authors (e.g. Chouinard & Crooks, 2008; Egdell, Dutton, & McQuaid, 2016) by continuing to explore the tensions between neoliberal values and the voluntary sector. Whilst shaping the change and continuity of charities according to competition and marketisation principles can be favourable (it may allow organisations who conform to secure more funds for their programmes), the approach incurs significant drawbacks (such as developing frameworks that pander to the wants of funders instead of to the needs of young people). To 'capture' the influence of a neoliberal ethos on SportHelp's growth, I have relied on Foucault's (2008) concept of governmentality. Consequently, my paper contributes to existing knowledge within the youth sport and charity literatures by offering an 'insider's view' of how embedded 'businessisation' is within SportHelp. Through my stories, I aim for readers to emotionally connect with the reality SportHelp managers contend with *en route* to fulfilling the charity's goal: to support the psychosocial development of socio-economically disadvantaged young people. Hopefully, this paper can influence policy, both in the youth sports charity sector and beyond, by allowing (and encouraging!) charities to create more holistic frameworks capable of addressing the multifaceted needs of young people.

Autoethnography and stories as a research method

An autoethnography entails inserting the self (auto) into the study (graphy) of social and cultural phenomena (ethno) (Liggins, Kearns, & Adams, 2013). Whilst a defining characteristic of autoethnographies is 'the use of personal experience to examine and/or critique cultural experience' (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013, p. 22), not all personal writing can be considered autoethnographic. According to Jones et al. (2013), autoethnographies are defined by four characteristics. The first is that 'autoethnographies comment or critique on cultural practices' (p. 22). By using perspectives (gathered through field work and interviews) other than my own, my autoethnography critiques the influence of neoliberal governmentality on the youth sports charity SportHelp. Secondly, in providing this critique through a novel lens—an 'insider's view'—my autoethnography 'make[s] a contribution to existing research' (p. 23).

A third aspect of autoethnographies is that they ‘embrace vulnerability with a purpose’ (p. 24). From the start of my stories, I present myself as a vulnerable person whose expectations of the youth sport charity sector are challenged. The purpose of my vulnerability is to illustrate SportHelp’s struggles to survive in a competitive landscape characterised by neoliberal policies and a business ethos. Lastly, ‘autoethnographies create reciprocity in order to compel a response’ (p. 24). My paper is driven by the desire to engage with readers, and to encourage them to think and feel about a topic in a way they might have otherwise not done so. To do this, I have used the framework of an ‘evocative autoethnography’ where I could infuse emotions into my narrative (Ellis, 1991, 1997). These emotions, centred on how my expectations of SportHelp were subverted, were central to my experience. Consequently, through my story, I wish to empower the reader to ‘vicariously live an experience’ (Rambo Ronai, 1992, p. 123) in the youth sports charity world.

Many criticisms have been levelled towards the autoethnographic approach. Whilst Coffey (1999) has claimed autoethnographies are self-indulgent, Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) outlined how other authors have dismissed the method’s supposed lack of rigour and theoretical robustness. The purpose of this paper is not to defend the approach—that has been done elsewhere (see Rambo Ronai, 1995; Sparkes, 2000, 2002). Instead, I wish to add to the existing autoethnographic accounts in both the charity and sport literature. Previously, Coghlan (2012) used a three-day charity cycling event to explore participants’ experiences at an event which intersects the disciplines of charities, tourism, and sport. Elsewhere, whilst Purdy, Potrac, and Jones (2008) analysed the athlete-coach relationship in competitive rowing through the lens of power and resistance, McMahon and DinanThompson (2011) explored the regulatory practices (at times imposed by the self) on elite swimmers’ bodies. My paper, amongst other topics, builds on the themes of regulatory practices (by discussing neoliberal governmentality), resistance (to neoliberal governmentality), and the intersection of charities and sport. Consequently, my autoethnography aims to stimulate a conversation which further explores the nexus between youth sport charities and neoliberalism.

Writing my story and analysing it

To share my stories I have used the layered account format (Rambo Ronai, 1992, 1995). This framework eschews the chronological story-telling approach where events are described from start to finish. Instead, I jump through time and space to offer an account of my ‘lived experience’. Each of these shifts is denoted by ‘***’. A particular strength of the layered account is it does not claim that one version of events is superior to the rest. I strive to convey my lived experience as ‘an acceptable-to-me-for-the-moment portrayal’ (Rambo Ronai, 1995, p. 398), and acknowledge my stories do not constitute the only or ‘right’ interpretation of events.

My layered narrative encompasses the two periods of time I spent with SportHelp: a 4-month placement with SportHelp followed by a subsequent 8-month data generation period for my PhD. The gap between the end of my placement and start of data generation was six months. During the placement, I was employed (and paid) by SportHelp to produce a literature review and devise a questionnaire on the topics SportHelp chose. For my data generation period, I was neither paid nor guided by SportHelp’s goals; I conducted my own research. Therefore, my stories were crafted from a combination of personal reflections, observations, and semi-structured interviews. These interviews lasted an average of an hour, were conducted on SportHelp’s premises, and featured five managers and four sports coaches. In turn, my stories were analysed using thematic analysis, an approach often used in autoethnographic research (Coghlan, 2012; Ellis, 2004). My stories are presented together, and subsequently analysed as a whole.

Judging criteria for autoethnographies are fluid because ‘they are generated in the doing of this writing rather than outside or prior to it’ (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 773). Since validity and reliability are not suited to judge autoethnographies (Sparkes, 2009), I have echoed Carless and Sparkes (2008) approach by providing a list of criteria that can help readers judge my work. For Richardson (1994), an autoethnography should (1) help us understand a social phenomenon and its importance,

and (2) inspire the reader and encourage them to generate questions. If at the end of this paper the reader has a greater sense of how neoliberal governmentality influences SportHelp, and, in turn, is asking themselves new questions (such as 'are charities run like businesses better charities?'), my autoethnography has been successful. To these judgement criteria I add two more: 'personal narrative and storytelling as an obligation to critique' (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 773) and 'evocation and emotion as incitements to action' (p. 773). To achieve the former, readers should judge my autoethnography based on my capacity to critique neoliberal governmentality and its influence on SportHelp. Furthermore, if the emotionality in my work prompts readers 'to care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, to act' (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433), even if it is to view or think of charities and their struggles in a different light, my autoethnography will have achieved its purpose.

Given my autoethnography knits my vulnerabilities with a 'behind-the-scenes' view of SportHelp, I was careful to adhere to Tullis (2013) ethical recommendations. I protected myself from harm by not putting myself in compromising situations, and I protected SportHelp and its staff from harm by anonymising all names with pseudonyms. Furthermore, I gained written informed consent from both SportHelp and the managers who feature in my stories. I secured this informed consent for my stint as a placement student, and subsequently for my PhD data collection phase. Despite having this consent, I was aware this autoethnography could (incorrectly) be interpreted as being highly critical of SportHelp. Publishing it without subjecting the paper to a member check (allowing SportHelp to read the article) would have been unethical, and could have potentially contravened the 'do no harm' principle. I sent the article to Dane, my main contact in SportHelp and a prominent figure in the autoethnography, for him to corroborate. This member check also served to comply with another of Tullis (2013) guidelines: do not publish anything you would not show to the persons mentioned in the text.

I was excited to begin collaborating with SportHelp. Since landing in the UK as an undergraduate student, I had come to appreciate the importance charities play in UK society. In comparison with my home country, Spain, charities in the UK were everywhere! It was amazing: every town I visited had a charity shop. Learning about charity reports and research through major news outlets ceased to be a novelty. I even normalised the fact that people were willing to run absurdly long distances in fancy dress to 'raise funds for charity'! This surface-level relationship I developed with the UK's 'charity scene' shaped my perception of both the UK's voluntary sector and society: I sensed a deep care to help those in need. Whilst corporations and government seemed primarily concerned with profit making and efficiency, charities appeared to prioritise human beings. It felt like charities operated in a bubble, untarnished by the competitive pressures that plagued big businesses. I was eager to form part of this charity bubble!

As I walked into SportHelp's headquarters, a sea of desks populated with laptops and accompanied by black leather swivel chairs coolly stared back at me. I hesitated. I wasn't expecting this. I wasn't sure what I expected ... but something less 'office-y'. Less 'consultancy-looking'. Then again, this was my first contact with a charity. I re-grouped by reminding myself to keep an open mind. Whilst I absorbed the 'professional' atmosphere, Dane, my point of contact within SportHelp, cheerfully rushed over to greet me. Dane was a middle manager who worked on the evaluation branch of the charity. As he showed me around the offices, he introduced me to his colleagues by enthusiastically saying 'Ioannis is doing his PhD!' Staff generally reacted by looking impressed, which made me uncomfortable. I didn't think getting a degree was more impressive than making a difference in young people's lives ...

Natalie, a long-standing trustee in the charity with a background in finance, passionately recounted SportHelp's history. It all started with providing young people living on estates with the opportunity to play sport during the summer. Over the span of more than a decade, the organisation blossomed and evolved. At first, 'it was more seat-of-the-pants, it was quite opportunistic' Natalie

recalled, with a degree of nostalgia. 'As the charity grows, you become more professional' she added. The word 'professional' echoed in my mind. That's precisely the vibe I had picked up when I first walked into SportHelp's offices. But it felt 'wrong' to describe a charity as 'professional'. I thought 'professional' was a word often associated to corporate businesses? However, if a charity isn't 'professional', does it mean it is 'unprofessional'? That's certainly not the case ... so maybe there's nothing wrong with SportHelp being 'professional'?

I was fascinated to learn that SportHelp's core objective had not changed since the charity's inception: to help socio-economically disadvantaged young people by using sport. What was even more astounding was that I could not find a single 'defector' from the SportHelp cause. All the staff I spoke to proudly believed in the power of sport for good. And this was not about parroting the party line. I felt uplifted: yes! This is what a charity is all about, right? A group of people, energetically rowing in the same direction with the goal of helping others! This is what I expected! However, whilst the SportHelp staff 'knew' how powerful sport could be to help young people, they needed a new way to evaluate and 'prove' the impact of their programmes. This precipitated a four-year organisational shift. That's why I was brought on board; to help with this process.

The new way of evaluating programmes required changing the charity's 'business strategy'. Again, my ears perked up. 'Business strategy'? Isn't that a term corporations use? As a member of the Evaluation Team, Dane and his colleagues struggled to accurately 'capture' SportHelp's results in a way funders could easily grasp. As important as this is for SportHelp's economic survivability, it was not what truly drove Dane: 'I want to represent the work that coaches do on a day to day basis, and, equally, the improvement that the young people show' he said. 'To capture that is nigh on impossible, but I'm going to have a bloody good go at doing it!' Dane seemed caught between worlds. He wanted the best for his charity, but he was also fully aware that producing results tailored to funders is fundamental to evidence SportHelp's impact and secure future funding. 'The balance of power between us and the funder is very much in their favour, to the point that you are not necessarily jumping through hoops, but we certainly know where to jump and when to jump', Dane confessed.

At the core of the new business strategy was a bespoke framework SportHelp developed, 'Sport For Good' (SFG). Dane explained the three-pronged purpose of the framework: to shun previously used 'off-the-shelf' measurement tools, to create an approach tailored to SportHelp's service users, and to become 'unique' amongst the charity's competitors. Whilst retaining the goal of helping young people through sport, this framework altered how that goal was met. SFG used sport as a vehicle to teach life skills, specifically twelve life skills (such as 'leadership', 'determination', and 'self-discipline'¹). Dane fantasised about his vision for SFG, namely, to build an 'organisational currency, whereby we can almost buy, or sell, or trade, in SFG, almost like you would do on the stock market, because it has that almost explicit, tangible existence'. He seemed comfortable using 'business-speak', which, in turn, made me realise that I was not *as* uncomfortable hearing 'business-speak' as I had been initially. Did this mean I was internalising and normalising talking about a charity in business terms?

My task, Dane explained, was to produce a literature review about each of the twelve life skills in SFG, as well as constructing a questionnaire SportHelp could use to measure SFG's components in its service users. That way, SportHelp could compile SFG scores of its users at the start and end of the year, and attribute youths' improvement to the charity's work. I could see how this approach would make results easily communicable to funders. However, as I went home that day, my head was spinning. My expectations of how a UK charity operated seemed divorced from reality. I had met passionate charity employees who spoke about 'business plans' and 'business strategies'. One manager even remarked they wanted SportHelp to become a 'market leader' of the youth sport charity sector. SportHelp appeared to be stuck between two worlds: they weren't a corporate business, but needed to operate like one. I did not feel like this charity was in a protective bubble, devoid

of efficiency or competitive worries. Quite the contrary. SportHelp was vulnerable ... very vulnerable. Was this the same for the rest of UK sports charities?

I was curious about what instigated the new 'Sport For Good' framework. According to Dane, it started with a major consultancy firm who 'wanted to feel good about themselves and thus do some consultancy work for third sector organisations'. Though somewhat sceptical of the firm's underlying motives, Dane highlighted the value of this *pro-bono* work for SportHelp's business strategy.

They were, as you can imagine, quite hot on measurables, being involved in finance and strategy and stuff like that, as they are. They kind of heightened our awareness of OK, we pay by results and you need to start generating your own results, and own your results. That started the ball rolling'.

Had the consultancy inculcated a 'business-speak' culture in SportHelp managers, or was it there already? Regardless, I soon realised just how influential big city businesses had been on both the charity and the development of SFG.

It was Natalie, the long-standing trustee, who offered a greater glimpse of the historical *pro-bono* work SportHelp had received from 'very professional organisations'. These included banks, consultancy firms, firms that specialised in corporate evaluation, and an umbrella organisation that determined which charities were 'worthy recipients' of either funds or help. I was overwhelmed. SportHelp had received a substantial amount of corporate input towards shaping its 'business strategy'! Though Natalie acknowledged that some corporates' behaviour was 'misguided', she felt there was 'a lot more willingness to go out and help'. Like Dane, she was comfortable using 'business-speak'. The discomfort I experienced when I first heard Dane and Natalie speak in business terms resurfaced ... but it was tempered by yet another realisation. These major companies do not support *every* charity. Which means they either help those that have a worthy cause and are doing a good job, or those organisations with high stocks of social capital. SportHelp appeared to tick all three boxes, particularly given the trustees' connections to the business world! So ... was it possible that more corporate support led to better evidenced outcomes, which led to further corporate support, which resulted in better programmes? Could operating like a business actually improve SportHelp's work?

Emily described herself as an 'ethical fundraiser' who refused to be donor led. She was conscientious, and deeply believed in SportHelp's goal. She was keen to protect SportHelp's mission from corruption by avoiding dependency on a single, major donor (and thus becoming a puppet of them). Instead, SportHelp sourced funds from corporate partners (such as banks and consultancy firms), trusts, foundations, and national governing bodies. But how to define 'corruption'? With the development of SFG, SportHelp had retained its central goal but had been influenced by funders and big businesses on *how* to meet their goal. Does that constitute corruption? After all, Emily described how funding from Corporate Social Responsibility budgets big companies wield is often 'connected a bit to what the corporate does, and a lot of corporate funding is connected to employability and skills training'. Is instilling life skills in young people just about employability and skills training? My view of charities in a clear bubble was rapidly changing. I was caught in between the murky lines of charities and businesses. Did the adoption of a business ethos corrupt SportHelp's path, and, more importantly, did it matter as long as the charity helped their service users?

I was stuck in a cognitive dissonance rut. SportHelp had to compromise, and adopt business principles, to grow. I asked Dane a tough question: was there a possibility that the results SportHelp sought were tailored more towards the funders wants than the young people's needs? Dane paused for a moment, and sighed:

Yeah, I completely agree. There's a lot of ... it's, to be honest, if I was being crude, it would be borderline hypocrisy. What our main challenge is, is to balance the needs of the people who pay for the programmes to be there in the first place with the needs of the people who access the programmes. I think there are a lot of underlying, slightly naïve assumptions about the nature of the issues and the issues the young people encounter, and

that's naivety from us, but also from funders, so they will pay on outcomes that are completely impossible to deliver, or don't make a great deal of relevance. The whole sort of, they call it the 'bums on seats approach', whereby lots of funders, big funders, will fund just through people come through the door. How many people have you had come through the door in the last six months? Oh, 100? Well, get it up to 120 in 3 months' time, brilliant. 120? Done. Have your money. But that doesn't make a great deal of sense when we are talking about sport for development. It is actually more difficult to develop people the more people you have on your programme. These are the kinds of things we are constantly battling against.

Dane's honesty powerfully struck me, and made me appreciate his plight. As much as he, and SportHelp, cared about young people and wanting to help them, I sensed that goal was trumped by a more immediate issue. Survivability. Whilst the 'Sport For Good' framework was aimed at supporting young people, the strategy had an underlying—and crucial—goal: 'the whole point of SFG is to demonstrate that what we do has positive impact, so we can raise more money'. Beatrice, SportHelp's Chief Operating Officer, was unequivocal in her analysis. More money means more programmes, which means more capacity to help youths. And it worked, too. SportHelp's success centrally stemmed from embracing their business strategy, as Natalie confided in me: 'when you talk to funders, the feedback to us is that they are very impressed about what we are doing'.

As I said good-bye to Dane and the SportHelp managers, I walked away with a bittersweet sensation. I was troubled by the extent to which my expectations of the charity scene had been subverted. Had the adoption of business principles by charities been there all along, since I landed in the UK in 2006? As sceptical as I am of the 'altruistic' actions of big businesses—akin to Dane and Emily—corporate influence on SportHelp benefitted the charity by helping them secure more funds, thus prolonging their work with youths. But a burning question lingered: did the ends justify the means? As my initial clear cut perceptions between a corporate business and a charity blurred, I could only wonder... can a charity that operates like a business *actually* become a better charity?

Since the 1980s, the UK voluntary sector has increasingly been reformed to align with market values (Bruce & Chew, 2011). These values are often grouped under the banner of 'neoliberalism'. Neoliberalism is a political and economic philosophy which has become one of the dominant ideologies in the western world (Steger & Roy, 2010). At the core of neoliberalism is the sacrosanct principle of the free market. For the free market to operate successfully, supply and demand should be driven by unrestricted competition. Akin to how the animal kingdom regulates itself through survival of the fittest, the market should not be influenced by any external force (such as government) attempting to shape or constrain it (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Market 'fitness' is determined by the capacity to accumulate financial capital (Brown, 2003), or, at the very least, not run out of it. In short, the strongest in the jungle—the market—will survive whilst the weak will perish.

Neoliberal ideals emerged in the 1970s in the Chicago School as a counter-movement to Keynesian welfare (Palley, 2005). This 'new' liberalism was based on the values of classical liberalism, which upheld individual freedom (Locke, 1689) and the existence of a free market where labour and items could be exchanged (Smith, 1776). What separates neoliberalism from classical liberalism is the proliferation of 'ruthless competitive individualism' (Giroux, 2005, p. 8) and the rise of the 'enterprise society' (Lazzarato, 2009). As an 'enterprise society', every service or institution has to be reconfigured to align with free market values. The solution to the lack of a particular market is to create one (Harvey, 2005), even in the case of institutions that do not naturally align with business values, such as education or health. The third sector, which encompasses charities (like SportHelp), is no exception to this trend (Buckingham, 2009; Davies, 2011 ; Fyfe, 2005). However, neoliberalism is a nebulous term: it is rare to encounter a self-proclaimed neoliberal. To conceptualise such a diffuse subject, I will examine the influence of neoliberalism on SportHelp through the lens of governmentality (Foucault, 2008).

By governmentality, Foucault refers to the social and political forces that guide our behaviours and attitudes as individuals. More specifically, *neoliberal* governmentality refers to the social and political forces that guide our behaviours and attitudes as individuals *in relation to free market values*. These ‘forces’ (also known as ‘technologies’ or ‘rationalities’) are not neutral (Larner & Butler, 2005); they shape charities like SportHelp through specific processes:

This governmentality perspective sheds further light on the processes of organisational change, demonstrating how monitoring and reporting processes can operate as ‘technologies’ for exerting government power at a distance by normalising particular preferred approaches or procedures within the voluntary sector (Buckingham, 2009, p. 245).

What prompted SportHelp’s development of SFG was the need to carefully monitor and report their work with young people. Monitoring a charity programme in itself is not new, and it certainly pre-dates the neoliberal epoch. However, what is part of the neoliberal package is the increased pressure to monitor and report through calculation and measurement (Larner & Butler, 2005). This is not only a symptom of neoliberal governmentality inculcating an ‘economic rationale’ in charities; it is also a consequence of the intensification of competition for funds and contracts in the voluntary sector (Davies, 2011). As much as SportHelp wanted me to develop a questionnaire for the ‘Sport For Good’ framework that could positively serve their young participants, the charity needed a tool that would help guarantee their survival. This is precisely what Beatrice, the Chief Operating Officer, summarised when she said ‘the whole point of SFG is to demonstrate that what we do has positive impact, so we can raise more money’.

Another aspect of neoliberal governmentality that shaped the SFG framework is ‘responsibilised autonomy’ (Morison, 2000, p. 119): ‘the sector is being encouraged to exercise a “responsibilised autonomy” and pursue its interests through a framework where the “systems of thought” and “systems of action” emphasise and reinforce an economic rationality alongside the more traditional welfare ethos’. SportHelp’s realisation that they needed to ‘own their results’, as Dane put it, constitutes this ‘responsibilised autonomy’. By creating the SFG framework, SportHelp designed a bespoke approach tailored to the charity’s goals. This ensured SportHelp’s previous practice, shoe-horning existing ‘off-the-shelf’ frameworks to align with the charity’s mission, was no longer observed. In this light, it is hard to argue with the benefits of ‘responsibilised autonomy’—it is an example (echoing Buckingham’s, 2009, findings) of the positive influence neoliberal governmentality can have on charities. However, developing SFG whilst adhering to an ‘economic rationale’ of measurement and calculation arguably limited the benefits the framework could offer young people.

Despite the multiple benefits the SFG framework provides for young people, neoliberal governmentality curtailed these benefits in two ways. The first is through the possible and unintentional ‘oppression’ of young people:

Pedagogy which begins with the egoistic interests of the oppressors (an egoism cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism) and makes of the oppressed the objects of its humanitarianism, itself maintains and embodies oppression. It is an instrument of dehumanization (Freire, 2003, p. 54).

Whilst ‘oppressors’, ‘egoistic’ and ‘false paternalism’ in SportHelp’s case are at best unnecessarily strong descriptors, and at worst, untrue characterisations of the charity’s motives, Freire’s ideas reflect the dangers of a competitive, neoliberal landscape. As I discussed earlier, the core purpose of SFG was to evidence SportHelp’s work and, in turn, support the charity’s ‘egoistic’ economic survival. Again, the term ‘egoistic’ must not be taken at surface value: SportHelp’s interest in survival was not for their own sake, it was for the young people’s. Nevertheless, this still places the charity’s survival needs ahead of service users’ needs. This is an issue Dane hinted at in his discussion of ‘borderline hypocrisy’ in relation to the balance of funders and youths’ needs. Clearly, ‘Sport For Good’ was designed to help young people, but without creating a framework capable of securing funds in the first place, there would be no possibility to support youths.

The second way in which neoliberal governmentality constrained the development of SFG was in the contents of the framework. Whilst none of the twelve life skills in the framework particularly lend themselves easily to measurement, they arguably are more 'measurable' than other concepts like empathy or care. This is not because 'teamwork' is inherently more quantifiable than 'empathy', it is because 'teamwork' is more aligned to what major donors and funders expect as outputs and outcomes. In addition to the substantive *pro-bono* work SportHelp received from big city consultancy and banking firms, Emily described how Corporate Social Responsibility budgets are 'connected to employability and skills training'. Consequently, if SportHelp wanted to appeal to neoliberal funders, they needed a neoliberal framework which highlighted the correlation between personally responsible choices and a person's outcomes (Kumar, 2012). This approach is reflected in SFG: higher scores on each of the twelve life skills (which indicate a young person is making the right choices) correlate with being a good citizen. Even 'teamwork' was treated individually by asking questions in the vein of 'how good are you at teamwork?'.

Alternative frameworks of human development are at odds with neoliberal values, and thus, with the majority of organisations (government and corporations) which can provide sustainable funding. For instance, no charity can quantify or measure 'helping' youths in terms of Noddings (1984) notion of care. For her, care is specific to each individual and cannot be prescriptive. By developing a framework built upon life skills like 'teamwork' and 'leadership' (terms likelier to form part of a marketised, corporate vocabulary), SportHelp have been able to effectively present their credentials to the free market, thus 'demonstrating' their social worth. This is precisely what led Natalie to suggest that 'when you talk to funders, the feedback to us is that they are very impressed about what we are doing'. Consequently, neoliberal governmentality inconspicuously nudges charities into a corner by suggesting that it is in charities' own interests to abide by the free market's rules.

In addition to shaping SportHelp's monitoring and reporting practices (the SFG framework), neoliberal governmentality sculpted the charity's ethos through the influence of New Public Management (NPM). NPM refers to the focus on management, target setting, and efficiency practices which the UK voluntary sector has been subject to since the 1980s (Bevir, Rhodes, & Weller, 2003). NPM constitutes the application of business principles to the voluntary sector; what Bruce and Chew (2011) call the 'businessisation' of charity management. A key component of NPM and 'businessisation' is 'professionalisation', which, in turn, is an integral aspect of neoliberal governmentality (Bondi & Laurie, 2005). 'Professionalisation' in the voluntary sector entails

... hierarchical, bureaucratic structures with internal divisions of labour between managers, welfare professionals and volunteers. They [professionalised charities] tend to develop more passive forms of citizenship, where service users are consumers of welfare delivered by a professionalised workforce of paid staff and highly trained volunteers (Fyfe, Timbrell, & Smith, 2006, p. 637).

Natalie's description of how SportHelp used to be more 'opportunistic' and had subsequently grown to become 'more professional' resonates with Fyfe, Timbrell, and Smith's definition of 'professional organisations'. As I recounted throughout the autoethnography, SportHelp's 'professionalisation' was largely influenced by the substantial *pro-bono* work the charity received from corporate businesses. This influence appeared to normalise managers' use of what George Orwell could have termed 'business-speak'. There were frequent allusions to SportHelp's 'business strategy', 'business plan' or becoming a 'market leader'. Dane fantasised about the future value of SFG in relation to 'buy, or sell, or trade, in SFG, almost like you would do on the stock market'. These data illustrate how entrenched NPM values are in the charity, and how normalised they have become. Despite my temporary collaboration with SportHelp, I too succumbed to NPM. My initial surprise at hearing managers discuss the charity in business terms gradually ebbed away, and became relatively normal by the end of my tenure with SportHelp.

The internalisation of NPM through neoliberal governmentality is precisely what makes the process particularly insidious, as Foucault and numerous commentators have observed (e.g. Ball, 2000; Lorenz, 2012; Rose, 2000). Neoliberal values have become commonplace inconspicuously

and without coercion. The free market has become the default setting. The logic of applying a business model to all services, such as charities, is so ordinary it is largely unquestioned. How else could SportHelp successfully operate if it were neither 'professional' nor business-like? To survive in a market economy, SportHelp must play by the rules of the market. However, it is important to remember these market rules—inculcated through neoliberal governmentality—are not neutral:

... the good practice guides, transferable models, and evaluations now proliferating in the social sector are not simply neutral tools; they are governmental techniques that represent and help constitute governmental spaces and subjects in particular forms (Larner & Butler, 2005, p. 81).

Despite the power of neoliberal governmentality, it is not simply a top-down, one-way process—charities can shape neoliberal governmentality (Morison, 2000) by embracing certain benefits whilst resisting more toxic aspects. For instance, though Dane and Emily were sceptical of the motives behind big business founders or *pro-bono* work, they acknowledged it as a necessary by-product of securing sustainable funding for the charity. Dane's struggle to 'capture' the sports coaches' work, in spite of major donors' advocacy for a 'bums on seats' approach, echoes Williams, Cloke, and Thomas' (2012, p. 1487) analysis: 'what actually happens on the ground is contingent on the interaction of rationalities and technologies on the one hand, and the agency of both practitioners and clients on the other'. Resistance also came in the form of the charity's coaches who disliked the 'Sport For Good' framework because they felt they were being told how to coach. Unfortunately, I did not have space in the autoethnography to unpack this issue, nor to remark how another group of coaches embraced SFG as a toolkit they could use to teach intangible concepts like 'leadership'. These data illustrate the complexity of neoliberal governmentality as more than a mere top-down force. There are positive aspects to it, as well as the possibility to shape governance and resist it.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper is to illustrate how a neoliberal context influences the change and continuity of the UK youth sports charity SportHelp. Through sharing my story, I hope to have depicted the extent to which neoliberal governmentality (Foucault, 2008) shaped SportHelp's development and operation as a charity. By relying on Foucault's notion of governmentality I was able to 'capture' the intangible influence of neoliberalism. This influence is neither obvious nor overt: 'for any system of thought to become dominant, it requires the articulation of fundamental concepts that become so deeply embedded in common-sense understandings that they are taken for granted and beyond question' (Harvey, 2007, p. 24). Consequently, the conceptual structure of neoliberal governmentality enabled me to examine SportHelp's new approach towards monitoring and reporting (via the creation of the 'Sport For Good' framework) as well as SportHelp's use of New Public Management discourse.

This paper is not at attack on SportHelp, its staff, or its mission. SportHelp just want to help socio-economically disadvantaged young people. Unfortunately, neoliberal governmentality has shaped what constitutes 'help' and what type of frameworks can be used to provide it. Though neoliberal values have yielded some positives for SportHelp (such as the development of SFG as a tool for coaches, or increased support from corporate bodies that has resulted in the charity growing and aiding more young people), it is difficult to ignore the constraints 'businessisation' places on SportHelp. The needs to constantly set goals, adhere to procedures, and monitor outcomes have implications on the change and continuity of the charity; these needs stifle the possibility of creating more holistic solutions that may better serve SportHelp's young people (Ilcan & Basok, 2004, cited in Buckingham, 2009). Whilst considering goals, procedures, and monitoring as part of operating a charity pre-date the neoliberal epoch, it is the neoliberal increase in competition that exacerbates the importance attributed to those elements. As a result, 'professionalisation' can be disempowering (Fyfe et al., 2006). I recall a particularly poignant moment when Natalie talked about how Thomas, SportHelp's founder and Chief Executive Officer, would at times 'throw his hands in the air and

exclaim ‘I just can’t bear these procedures, I just want to be out there working with children and not writing bloody procedures!’”.

How can we be sure that neoliberal governmentality shaped SportHelp’s ethos? It is possible that SportHelp’s influential decision makers were hired because of their existing neoliberal beliefs. However, debating this issue at length misses the point; there is a growing body of research highlighting the systemic problem of neoliberal governmentality infiltrating the change and continuity of organisations in different spheres of society, such as NGOs (Thorpe & Rinehart, 2013) or education (Ball, 2012; Brown, 2015; Carr, 2016). Therefore, this paper’s use of an ‘insider’s view’ of how a neoliberal ethos influences SportHelp’s development illustrates how current policies, aimed at enhancing competition, do not necessarily produce the results government and funders think they do. Whilst there is value in charities identifying tangible outputs and outcomes, an over-emphasis on quantification and competition discourages charities from creating holistic frameworks entirely suited to the psychosocial development of young people (which is largely immeasurable). Instead, charitable organisations need to prioritise survival by adapting their ‘business strategy’ to economic rationales. At the end of the day, charities fundamentally want to help fellow human beings. They should be supported, not hindered. The change and continuity of a charitable organisation should not be driven by worries of how to survive; it should be propelled by the desire to meet young peoples’ needs.

Note

1. To protect the anonymity of the charity, I have not disclosed all the elements in the framework.

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